

Rattled by Farmer Suicides & Health Issues, Telangana Village Turns 250 Acres Organic!

Author - Jovita Aranha, Published on - 10.4.2019

[Enabavi became one of the first villages in Telangana, apart from Punukula in the Khammam district, to turn fully organic, entirely giving up the use of chemical pesticides, fertilisers, and genetically modified crops.](#)

Up until two decades ago, Telangana (then a part of undivided Andhra Pradesh) was a hotbed for farmer suicides. Chemical farming, one of the perils of the Green Revolution, was rampant at the time.

While Guntur ranked first in the unrestrained use of pesticides, Warangal ranked second. This excessive dependence on chemicals not only increased the yearly cost of production per acre, but also resulted in crop failure due to increased pest resistance.

In the early 90s, the semi-arid regions of Telangana witnessed severe attacks of the deadly bontha purugu (red hairy caterpillar), which ate away most crops including groundnut, castor and cotton.

[A chemical-free village, Enabavi](#)

The pest is known to have excess body hair, which acts as a protective layer, and even strong chemicals were ineffective in curbing it. This led to crop failure, and the hopes of several farmers were burnt to the ground.

Defeated by their circumstances, suffocating under mounting debts, on the brink of poverty and witnessing their land turning unsuitable for agriculture due to chemicals, several farmers gave up their lives.

Enabavi

The village of Enabavi in the Warangal district was one among the villages that had suffered through this agrarian crisis.

This was till 52 households decided to give up chemicals and find an alternate path to manage the dreaded pests.

Assisted by retired agricultural scientists like Dr MS Chary and Mr Quayyom, along with Dr NK Sanghi who was working with the Zonal Coordinating Unit of ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research) and Sri MV Sastri of Centre for World Solidarity, an experiment was initiated to manage the insects before they reached the larval stage.

Known as the 'NPM method,' the focus of this experiment was to stop adult insects from multiplying. It used various biological pest-control techniques without relying on pesticides or synthetic toxins and instead, focussed on biological means.

Some of these techniques included the introduction of natural predators, use of natural insecticides like neem, tulsi leaf, citrus oil, eucalyptus oil, onion, garlic spray, use of pheromone traps, field sanitation, timely sowing, nutrient management, maintain proper plant population, soil solarisation, deep summer ploughing, etc.

Once the farmers adopted these techniques, pests, especially the red hairy caterpillar never made an appearance in the village again.

Red Hairy Caterpillar

The success of this experiment got the farmers thinking. If they could give up chemical pesticides, then why not switch entirely to organic and stop using chemical fertilisers as well?

This is how Enabavi became one of the first villages in Telangana, apart from Punukula in the Khammam district, to turn fully organic, entirely giving up the use of chemical pesticides, fertilisers, and genetically modified crops.

Today, if you were to enter this green oasis, the first thing that you will notice is a board put up by the villagers.

The board states that Enabavi is a 'Chemical-free village,' and this is a label it has proudly owned since 2003, even though the declaration came about in 2005.

Ponnam Mallaiah, one of the village elders and the then chief is credited for mobilising all of the 52 households to turn to organic farming.

However, the shift wouldn't have been possible without the continuous efforts and motivation from NGOs, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture and Centre for Rural Operations and Programmes Society (CROPS).

Villagers at work

The village which is self-sufficient and grows all kinds of crops from paddy, pulses, maize, cotton, tobacco, chilli to vegetables, grappled several odds to become this way.

Today it is a model village and knowledge centre for everyone who visits it — from fellow farmers from different parts of India to agricultural scientists, officers, and experts.

Speaking to **The Better India**, Ponnam Mallaiah says, "Our people were getting poisoned. It made us remember the old days when we never used chemicals or suffered from health problems. As the use of chemicals increased, the health problems also arose, especially among women and children. The costs kept increasing, and the pests became immune to chemicals also continued to thrive. So, we had to make the shift. To be honest, this shift towards organic helped us to curb several issues. We overcame the drought, so much so that our crops can withstand dry spells of 14-15 days. Even our health conditions improved."

Methods they followed

Highlighting a few of the techniques that the farmers use, Mallaiah says, "We use intercropping to control pests, improve soil fertility and make farming profitable and sustainable. We also use pheromone traps in our fields. Apart from the regular funnel-shaped contraption, bottles are used to trap pests too. We train our children to identify pests and diseases."

They make their compost from all plant residues, use tank silt every four years and even use waste from their poultry in the backyard.

Another farmer, Venkatesh adds, "We use neem seed extract, vitex leaf extract, chilli garlic extract to manage pests and diseases. In the last 15 years, we have not seen any pest outbreak even in our cotton even though we use non-BT cotton. This is at a time when many farmers in the district have suffered due to the infamous pink bollworm."

They have also alternated the use of synthetic urea with Azolla, a fern-like plant, as bio-fertiliser in their paddy fields. It spreads rapidly and curbs the growth of harmful weeds.

They also use *jeevamrutham* and *panchagavya* as growth promoters.

While the villagers manage their own seeds, they also produce, preserve and sell seeds to others.

Dr GV Ramanjaneyulu, the Executive Director of CSA (Centre for Sustainable Agriculture) who has worked closely with the villagers adds, "In 2004, the farmer crisis resulted in 3,500 farmer suicides in the state. At the time, the government appointed several committees to look into this crisis and come up with models that could be adopted. The villages of Pulukula and Enabavi stood out as examples. While the Department of Agriculture did not recognise the potential of the model, saying it was village-specific, several journalists, agri-scientists, and even the Rural development Department felt it was a good model. We partnered with the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) and SHGs to scale up the program through Farmer Field Schools and community resource persons. The program known as Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture was scaled across the state."

By 2008, half the use of pesticides in the state was brought down.

Enabavi's journey to organic farming also made it to Satyameva Jayate, the popular talk show where Dr Ramanjaneyulu was invited.

Is organic farming challenging? Yes, it is.

Ponnam Mallaiah explains, "Organic farming is a bit intensive, and when the farmers don't get a good remuneration for their produce, they feel disheartened and tend to follow easy ways of using chemicals. So, when they try to drop out, we talk to them, help them manage their crops and bring them back onto organic farming again. That being said, pesticides haven't been used in our village in the last 15 years."

Mr Lingaiah C.E.O, CROPS explaining organic manure in a pie diagram to then Environment Minister, Jairam ramesh and SERP, C.E.O Mr. Vijay kumar

The farmers soon realised that it wasn't enough to shift to organic farming. They needed a market to get a reasonable price for their produce as well.

This thought led to the formation of the 'Enabavi organic farmers' cooperative.' Through this, the farmers started selling their produce in the Hyderabad market directly for better prices.

"Soon enough, they realised that the logistics were getting expensive. To tackle this, we prompted the citizens in Hyderabad to form a consumer cooperative which could start buying the produce directly from the farmers' cooperative. When several such farmers' cooperatives started cropping up, they decided to merge under a single federation called the Sahaja Aharam Producer Company. Now, Sahaja sells food directly, and the farmers' share is 75 per cent of the consumer price."

Ponnam adds, "After the cooperative was formed, we were able to market our produce better. I think, if the government extends its support to organic farming on par with chemicals, it will help farmers. Similarly, Minimum Support Price (MSP) can be increased for the organic produce."

MSP is the price at which government purchases crops from the farmers, regardless of the ongoing market price for the crops.

Impact

Villages around Enabavi, like Manikyapuram, Siripuram, Kallem have also adopted organic farming. The farmers in Enabavi have not restricted the knowledge of the best practices to themselves. They train others, right from NABARD officials, agri-scientists, central govt ministers and small and marginal farmers who visit them.

"Enabavi only had only a single pond two decades ago. Today, it harvests water through 26 tube wells and 11 open wells. In the last 15 years, there hasn't been a single farmer suicide in the village and other villages which are inspired and adopted similar practices. Sahaja Aharam Producer Company has 25 member cooperatives today. This is the biggest impact of the shift to organic farming," signs off Dr Ramanjaneyulu.

First published by

The Better India

on 9 April 2019